Report from the South Side Citizen Action Team

October, 2007

Background

In July 2006, Mayor Bernero formed the South Side Citizen Action Team consisting of twelve citizens interested in the development of a South Side Community Center. Mayor Bernero tasked the group with finding a suitable location for a South Side Community Center under the limitation of spending no more than \$3.2 million on construction and land acquisition, or to purchase an existing building for that purpose.

Included on the Citizen Action Team were Chairperson Frank Lain, President of Averill Woods Neighborhood Association, and members Monica Dungey, President of Coachlight Neighborhood Association, now City Councilmember Derrick Quinney, former City Councilmember Alfreda Schmidt, Anne Wilson, Vice-President of Colonial Village Neighborhood Association, Bishop David Maxwell, Director of the City's Office of Community and Faith-Based Initiatives, Carmen Turner, Executive Director of Boys and Girls Club of Lansing, Third Ward residents Paul Carrier and Marilyn Plummer, Second Ward residents Edward Benson and Tina Houghton, and long-time community activist Gordon Wilson. Ms. Dungey, Ms. Schmidt, Mr. Benson and Mr. Wilson also served on the City Council's Ad-Hoc Committee on South Side Community Centers.

The Citizen Action Team met monthly both at City Hall and at on-site locations. Chairperson Lain invited Council members to attend meetings and on at least one occasion Councilmember Kathie Dunbar attended as well as interested citizens Jonathan Solis, Rick Kibbey and Darnell Oldham, Sr. The City commissioned the architectural firm Fishbeck, Thompson, Carr and Huber to facilitate and Special Assistant to the Mayor Joe McDonald to act as liaison.

In addition to spending constraints, other factors that the citizen team analyzed were demographics of the population being served, crime statistics and desired programming. The group narrowed its choices to three options that were deemed the best suited to serve the needs of citizens on the south side. Among the options were to purchase Our Savior Lutheran Church, located at 1601 W. Holmes Road, construction of a new facility on city park land at either Risdale Park or Benjamin Davis Park, or a joint venture between the City and Lansing School District to utilize the Hill Center for Academics and Technology as a combined educational facility and community center. Each site was evaluated as to its relative strengths and weaknesses.

Option A: Purchase Our Savior Lutheran Church, 1601 W. Holmes Road, Lansing

Purchase price: \$3.2 million

In relation to the other two alternatives, this choice was considered the least attractive option. Most team members were impressed with a number of characteristics of this property: the overall appearance and maintenance of the church, the land that would come with the property (about 22 acres), and the available space with technological wirings to all rooms.

However, it was generally agreed by members that the facility was not well suited for a community center and a considerable investment would be required to refurbish and upgrade the building (over and above the \$3.2 million asking price). In addition, the physical location of the church was not the best in relation to others that were closer to the target population of seniors and children. There also was concern regarding the structure's energy efficiency and that expenditures for utilities could potentially compete with programming dollars invested in the center. Therefore, this option was ruled out as a possibility.

Option B: New construction on existing park land at Risdale Park on Pleasant Grove

Cost of new construction: \$3.4 million (Feasibility Study by Fishbeck, Thompson, Carr and Huber)

New construction at Risdale Park was viewed as the second best alternative. (Benjamin Davis Park was rejected as a location because the park does not have access to existing utilities and the cost to cut in those utilities would consume too much of the available investment dollars.)

The consensus of the team members was that building a new structure at Risdale Park would be preferable to purchasing the church because construction costs could be limited to the available money and energy efficiencies would be built into the structure. The park's location on Pleasant Grove across from the Boys and Girls Club of Lansing and Pleasant View Magnet School was considered to be excellent with respect to target populations of children and seniors. Moreover, there existed the potential to coordinate programming with both the Boys and Girls Club and Pleasant View School.

The primary disadvantage with this option is that the amount of money available for construction would limit the different amenities that could be built into the structure and therefore limit the scope of programming that could be offered. The feasibility study conducted by Fishbeck, Thompson, Carr and Huber indicated that the construction costs based on the citizen team's desired programming would have exceeded the amount of money available. The building under consideration would consist of a multi-use gymnasium, locker rooms and meeting rooms. Although still preferable to the church, members concluded that seniors and other groups might be underserved with this option compared to the joint use of Hill Center and so this option was not chosen.

Option C: Joint agreement with Lansing School District to utilize portions of the Hill Center for Academics and Technology to be used as a city-operated community center

Cost of proposed City enhancements to the Hill Center: \$2.1 million

This option was unanimously supported by the Citizen Action Team. Members concluded that a joint agreement for a community center with the Lansing School District is the wisest decision both for taxpayers and the community at large.

Several factors weighed in favor of this decision. First, facilities at the Hill Center are ideal to meet the desired programming needs. Under the spending limitation, a new structure could not be built that includes all the amenities that Hill provides: a gymnasium, auditorium, swimming pool with locker rooms and sufficient parking and office space. Because the facility contains these features, a comprehensive and diverse set of programs could be developed, resulting in a much more utilized facility.

Hill Center is well situated to accommodate a large target audience – within a one mile radius of many children and senior citizens. This area covers the Coachlight and Churchill Downs neighborhoods and parts of the LENO neighborhood. It is located on CATA bus route. Integrating the school community with the community at large under a joint use agreement for this underutilized facility was also an exciting possibility for team members. Members also did not want to underestimate the impact that a community center at Hill could have on the surrounding area, potentially anchoring the southwest part of the city.

Lastly, a joint agreement for a community center would be the most fiscally responsible option. Both entities would save taxpayers money by sharing overhead and administrative expenses. Regional cooperation could also be extended to coordinate programming. In addition, cost estimates for recommended upgrades were substantially lower than new construction. Some of the enhancements that were identified include a divider for the gymnasium, refurbishing gym bleachers, reupholstering auditorium seats, a pool lift for seniors and the physically impaired, roof repair, adequate signage and a dedicated entrance and vestibule.

Therefore, the South Side Citizen Action Team makes the following recommendation:

Recognizing the need for adequate recreational and educational opportunities for Lansing residents on the south side, the City should enter into a long term agreement with the Lansing School District to utilize portions of the Hill Center for Academics and Technology to be used as a city-operated South Side Community Center and to make the necessary upgrades to optimize the facility for such usage.